Mac OS 10.4 (Tiger)
$129 (single user);
$199 (five-user family pack)
Apple Computer
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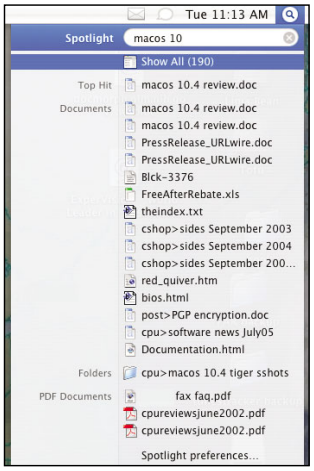
Mac OS 10.4

The Roar Of The Tiger

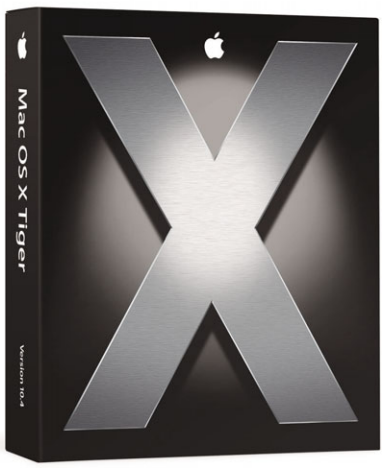
Mac OS 10.4, also known as Tiger, is the latest upgrade to the Macintosh operating system. Despite a handful of problems that I experienced during a month of heavy use, the OS's new features and speedups make me glad that I put Tiger in my tank.

My Tiger experience started badly when the installer didn't recognize my G4's third-party PCI IDE card, leading me to believe that the hard drive was trashed. Switching to the Mac's internal IDE bus solved the problem. After that false start, Tiger proved to be a rock-solid (it never crashed in a month of use) and feature-filled upgrade.



Tiger has its share of eye-catching new additions, including Dashboard, an accessory that lets you plug in your choice of numerous widgets to access a wide variety of information. A single click reveals all your installed widgets, which might include a TV Tracker (displaying what's on the tube right now), a wireless hotspot detector, a weather monitor, and sticky notes. Dashboard is elegant but really isn't anything new. The shareware program Konfabulator has done a similar trick for years. In fact, I like Konfabulator a little better because its widgets can remain on the desktop all the time. Dashboard's widgets appear on top of all other windows, and only when summoned.

If you have lots of friends and processor power, Tiger's upgraded iChat AV conferencing tool can let you video chat with up to three other people in a virtual conference room or audio chat with up to 10 people. iChat is elegant, but multiperson video conferencing only works with other Mac users. Meanwhile, problems that I had encountered in Mac OS 10.3 (Panther) while trying to videoconference with Windows users remain unresolved.



Once you move past Tiger's glitzy additions, you can appreciate the features that prove useful in your day-to-day routine. The new search tool, Spotlight, is worth the price of admission itself. Spotlight is speedy at finding data anywhere on your hard drive, even when you can't remember the file name or folder it's in. When you type a phrase into Spotlight's omnipresent search field, it shows the files that contain that phrase, including word processor documents, PDF files, email messages, and calendar items. Because it preindexes files, searches are nearly instantaneous, which is much more satisfying than the old search tool, Sherlock. When you're trying to find a bit of information in a 1,000-document haystack spanning several years, Spotlight is like magic.

Tiger's Internet tools are nicely honed, as well. The Safari Web browser has added an RSS reader and privacy tool, and Safari is faster than Firefox. A new screen saver, RSS Visualizer, shows your chosen RSS feed in a stunning display. Apple's Mail client brings an improved UI, and I found the client much more forgiving of balky IMAP-over-Wi-Fi links. Where you often needed to coddle the Mail's previous version to reconnect to the mail server, this version just works.

Another new Tiger tool is Automator, which can automate complex or repetitive tasks. These Workflows can perform tasks such as copying unread email to your iPod or combining several PDF files into a single document and then watermarking the pages. Automator could prove a useful tool for users who don't want to learn their way around AppleScript. Although I typically spend all day at my Mac, I wasn't able to find any chores that Automator could really help with, perhaps because Automator isn't a mature technology, or perhaps because I wasn't able to "think differently" enough to find a use for it.

Tiger will save time even for users who never bother to learn their way around Automator, as the OS is generally speedier than Panther. Other time-savers include a dictionary/thesaurus application that doesn't require Internet access to do lookups and full-screen image slideshows in Preview, Mail, and other applications.

Tiger requires a Mac with a G3 or later processor and an internal FireWire port. You need at least 3GB of free drive space, 256MB of RAM (although 512MB is the realistic minimum), and a DVD drive for installation. (If your Mac does not have a DVD drive, you can special-order the installation discs on CD.) Mac OS X has developed into a mature, elegant OS. With a dose of glitz and functional tune-ups, this is an upgrade that all Mac users will be able to appreciate. ▲

by Kevin Savetz

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect